3: Skrine G-3 (1922-1924) 1926 All Sinkiang All

forked rest attached to the barrel. A quarter of the circumference is occupied by a pile of rolled-up felts, bolsters and rugs; the wealth of the owners may be accurately gauged from the size of this pile, just as that of cottagers in a German forest may, according to Mark Twain, be judged by the dimensions of the manure-heap outside their door.

In some parts of the Chinese Pamirs the Kirghiz are said to be dying out, but I do not think this is the case among the Alps of Qungur. We found that few households contained less than two children; one woman had four and another told D. that she had had eight. Infant mortality is high, and the race is not prolific; if it were, the Malthusian problems raised would be insoluble in a country where the grazing, though excellent in quality, is strictly limited in quantity. But the Kirghiz of the Qaratash basin are by no means decadent or weakly, and the scanty population is, if anything, increasing. Considering their complete ignorance of hygiene and rules of diet, they are a remarkably healthy race, thanks no doubt to the open-air life they lead and to their avoidance of houses. The chief ailments D. came across in her amateur doctorings (which were enormously appreciated and had, so far as we knew, no fatal results) were skin diseases, indigestion and other stomach troubles, as well as running sores which looked in some cases as if they might be tuberculous. Some of the faces were pitted by small-pox, but not badly. It is interesting to note that the Qizil Tagh Kirghiz, who have given up tents and taken to houses, are subject to epidemics and are probably dying out. In one of the valleys of that region we passed a whole settlement which had been depopulated three years before by an epidemic of some fatal disease and was now deserted. Though the Kirghiz never wash, their *aq-ois* are as a rule carefully swept and free from vermin, and we seldom had any qualms about sleeping in them on occasion.

The women, as has already been noticed, are frank, fearless, self-reliant and natural, in refreshing contrast to their Turki sisters, at any rate in the towns.

"There is a sort of Scotch-ness about them" (says D. in one of her letters from Kaying Bashi), "a common-sense that is entirely lacking in the people of the plains. They love woolly gloves, muslin, mirrors, buttons, pins and so on because of their usefulness, not only because of their novelty, and would rather have enough plain stuff to make a dress or coat than the yard or two of bright-coloured satin which a Turki woman would immediately go for. . . . There is one extremely attractive and coquettish lady in this valley, but she is

3: Skrine G-3 (1922-1924) 1926 All Sinkiang All

be commuted at 12 tengas (2s.) per *charak*, the market price being 4 tengas.[1]

Talking to the mountain people one occasionally gets amusing little side-lights on the difficulties of house-keeping in an *aq-oi*. Among the woods at Chikir Aghzi we came upon some families striking camp. They said they were moving to an open piece of ground only a mile lower down.

"What is wrong with this camping-ground?" we asked.

"The mice have found us out and eat our bread," was the reply.

"Why don't you keep cats to eat the mice?"

"Because the cats would drink our milk!"

This was unanswerable, as anyone who had seen the interior of an *aq-oi* and its carefully-guarded "dairy" ought to have realized.

We crossed the Arpa Bel on 13th September, after spending the night at a chilly camping-ground above the highest fir-woods on the north-side. On the way up, when I was behind trying to take photographs, D. saw a pretty sight while she was waiting for me to come up. A herd of great shaggy yaks, unattended by any herdsman, came trooping down through the forest to drink at the stream. They came with such a rush, bringing earth and stones with them, that for a moment she thought it was an avalanche. They stood about in the water and on the grassy banks of the torrent, exactly like Highland cattle. They were still there when I came up, but my cortège disturbed them and they bunched together in the stream-bed as if awaiting attack, spoiling the picture. The dust-haze was worse than ever at the top of the pass, which I found to be 13,350 feet above the sea, and nothing whatever was visible of what would have been an unrivalled view. Both from the surveying and from the photographic point of view it was one of the worst pieces of luck I have ever had; for according to the calendar it was, or ought to have been, autumn and the clearest time of the year.

The Arpa Bel is a decidedly stiff pass, 6,000 feet on either side without a break, but although nothing whatever has been done to the track it is not actually dangerous. Still, it was as well that we had hired from the Pilal people fifteen

[1] The object is to encourage cultivation, even in pastoral country, and thus increase the population. Similarly, the Chinese encourage the planting of trees in the plains by collecting the land revenue partly in the form of timber.